

7 What Is the People of God? (A Narrative Answer)¹

The people of God is one of the most prominent themes in the Bible. This need not have been so: a religion could give theological significance only to people in general, or to the relationship between God and individuals. It has not always been acknowledged to be so: while Jewish theology has naturally recognized and wrestled with the theme, Christianity has found it easier to be predominantly individualistic, and biblical theology has not always given appropriate centrality to the theme of the community.

So what does it mean to be the people of God? Different contexts in First Testament times suggest different answers to this question. What it means to be God's people is bound up with history, in that it is worked out in concrete and changing human situations; we find ourselves examining the changing face of the people of God. And what it means to be God's people is bound up with history in the sense of "socially significant, public events." God's people is a clearly identifiable social entity; for a significant period it is an actual nation. It has a culture of its own and it is involved in changing mutual relationships with other cultures. Its life has to be lived in this context; its changing social structure interacts with its faith, and its social and historical experience affects what being God's people means.

Its story, as Israel tells it, divides itself by major events that herald new developments: Abraham's leaving Haran, the Israelites' departure from Egypt and occupation of Canaan, the institution of the monarchy, the exile, and the partial return of exiles to Judah. These epochs may be seen as a history of its covenant with Yahweh: the Abrahamic covenant, the Sinai covenant, the Davidic covenant, the covenant broken (with the exile) and renewed (with the return to Judah). Each epoch brings a change in the mode of being of God's people. It begins as a family (*mishpakhah*), one of the families of the sons of Shem (Gen 10:31-32). The fulfillment of God's promise makes it more than a family, a people ('am; e.g., Exod 1:9; 3:7), and indeed a nation (*goy*) alongside other nations, a political entity (e.g., Gen 12:2; Judg 2:20). The monarchy turns it into a state, a kingdom (*mamlakah* and related words; e.g., 1 Sam 24:20; 1 Chr 28:5). The exile reduces it to a remnant (*she'erit* and other expressions; e.g., Jer 42:2; Ezek 5:10). It is restored, to its land and to its relationship with Yahweh, as a religious community (*qahal*; e.g., Ezra 2:64; Neh 13:1).

1 The Wandering Family

Strictly, the history of *Israel* begins only in Egypt or in Canaan; as the Torah sees it, however, the story of God's people goes back to the family of Abraham (compare, e.g., Neh 9:7; Matt 1:1-18) if not that of Seth (Gen 4:25-26). God's people is thus portrayed as a genetic unit, and in a sense it always remains that. The name Israel marks it as the seed of one person. It is a family (e.g., Amos 3:2; Mic 2:3), a brotherhood (e.g., Deut 15), a clan (e.g., Jer 10:16), a household (e.g.,

¹ First published (with more extensive footnotes) as "A Contextual Study of the Theme of 'The People of God in the Old Testament,'" in *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 59-96.

Exod 16:31; 2 Sam 1:12), a people ('am, too, suggests a kinship relationship; unlike the English word "people," it is rarely used to mean merely "persons in general").²

Nothing outward distinguishes Abraham from many other second-millennium figures. It is God's call that marks out from other emigrations his departure from "the ancient and renowned city of Ur."³ Genesis calls it "Ur of the Chaldeans"; the designation probably belongs to the Neo-Babylonian period and suggests the might and pomp, as well as the arrogance and superstition, associated with the Chaldeans from the seventh century.⁴ Abraham leaves such a background in "the first Exodus by which the imperial civilizations of the Near East in general receive their stigma as environments of lesser meaning."⁵ It is a calling out of the world.

Yet Abraham is called out of the world for the world's sake. God's purpose is that he should experience such blessing that the world will pray to be blessed as he is blessed (Gen 12:3 NEB). Out of its context, such a promise might seem good news only for Abraham; it does not say that this prayer will be answered. In the context of Gen 1 - 11, however, it affirms that seeking blessing from Abraham's God is the way that a world under the curse can experience the fulfillment of God's original purpose of blessing. Specific stories (for instance, Abraham's prayer for Sodom) offer illustrations of the international and open stance of the stories in Gen 12 - 50.

The stress on genetic relationship would give the impression that individuals have no choice whether or not they belong to God's people. They have to be born into it; if they are born into it, this settles the matter. No prior confession of faith or acceptance of obligation is a necessary, or even a possible, condition of belonging to this people; this indicates that it is God's sovereignty, not human initiative, which brings it into existence. It is not a merely natural entity. A special act of God creates it. The notion of election is a key to understanding the notion of Israel. It is not even that God turns an already existent people into a personal possession; God brings a people into being. It exists as a people only because of an act of God.⁶ More specifically, a special act of a specific God creates it. What is distinctive about Israel is not that it sees itself as God's people (most peoples would make that claim) but that it sees itself as Yahweh's people, and it is this latter phrase that the First Testament nearly always uses.⁷

² G. E. Mendenhall believes that these kinship terms are only expressions for social links produced by some other cause, ethnic feeling being a postexilic phenomenon (*The Tenth Generation* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973], pp. 5, 27, 155, 171, 174, 220; cf. N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979/London: SCM, 1980], pp. 235-341). But the expressions are so pervasive and their implications are worked out so systematically that this seems implausible. See further sections 5 and 9 below.

³ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 80.

⁴ N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (reprinted New York: Schocken, 1970), p. 98.

⁵ E. Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1956), p. 140.

⁶ Cf. G. C. Macholz, "Das Verständnis des Gottesvolkes im Alten Testament," in W. P. Eckert and others (ed.), *Jüdisches Volk - gelobtes Land* (Munich: Kaiser, 1970), pp. 169-87 (pp. 172-77).

⁷ Cf. N. Lohfink, "Beobachtungen zur Geschichte des Ausdrucks hwhy M(," in H. W. Wolff (ed.), *Probleme biblischer Theologie* (G. von Rad Festschrift; Munich: Kaiser, 1971), pp. 275-305. Theological interest in the people of God thus tends to ignore the particularity of the usual First Testament phrase: cf. J.-M. Leonard, "Invitation à la prudence dans l'emploi de l'expression 'Peuple de Dieu,' *Communio Viatorum* 19 (1976): 35-60. Like the term

In Genesis, the divine initiative takes the characteristic form of a summons to the particular family of Abraham and a promise to them of blessing, a special relationship, and concretely of land and increase. Thus Israel is constituted the people of the promise, a people brought into existence by God's word.⁸ The populousness that is intrinsic to being a people will come about not by natural growth but by a divine gift that ignores ordinary human expectation, let alone the particular inability of Abraham and Sarah. The land that is also intrinsic to being a people will come to be theirs not by natural inheritance or natural right, nor by human achievement, but by divine gift that is also of a magnitude to belie both ordinary human expectation and the particular obstacles to its fulfillment that confront Abraham in the land. Thus faith is required of God's people, trust in the promise of its God. Obedience is also required of it, though not a life of obedience to a system of ethical, cultic, and social regulations such as Israel later received but a commitment to Yahweh's calling that follows where Yahweh directs on an individual pilgrimage toward a goal known only to Yahweh.⁹

Abraham's call out of the world also involves an exodus from politics; Abraham's family stands outside the power structures of the land it comes to live in. Perhaps the description of them as *'ibrim* places them among the many *'apiru* people outside the social structure of second-millennium Canaan. Yet they are not the freebooting mercenaries of the Amarna letters. Military and political involvement comes to Abraham exceptionally and accidentally, and even then Abraham undertakes only a limited rescue operation, by which he refuses to be personally profited (Gen 14). Such an attitude puts Abraham in an exposed position in a ruthless world. But Yahweh will see that he and his descendants are enriched (the term *rekush* appears in Gen 14:21 and 15:14). Yahweh will be his protector (the root *mgn* appears as a verb in Gen 14:20 and as a noun in 15:1). Yahweh, not a human ally, will be his covenant Lord (the term *berit* appears in Gen 14:13 and 15:18).¹⁰

Political involvement with the cities of the Arabah brought also religious involvement. The priest-king of Salem attributes Abraham's victory over the Mesopotamian kings to "El Elyon, owner of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:18-19). Abraham neither rejects Melchizedek's blessing nor accepts it without qualification: "Yahweh El Elyon" is his Lord. He can accept that the Canaanite high god is God and he can express his faith in Canaanite terms, as the ancestors elsewhere happily worship at Canaanite shrines, accept Canaanite observances such as the sacred tree, and acknowledge the Canaanite high god by names such as El Roi and El Olam (though they do not seem to identify with Canaanite Baal worship).

Yet this is not the whole of the ancestors' faith, nor its distinctive characteristic. The personal name of their God, according to passages such as Gen 14:22, was Yahweh, though if the name was actually known before Moses' time, its

"covenant," "people of God" has come to be a theological technical term of broader meaning than it has in the First Testament.

⁸ Cf. H.-J. Kraus, *The People of God in the Old Testament* (London: Lutterworth/New York: Association, 1958), p. 14.

⁹ Cf. J. D. W. Watts, *Basic Patterns in Old Testament Religion* (New York: Vantage, 1971), p. 45.

¹⁰ On this movement from Gen 14 to 15 see N. H. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, pp. 121-22; Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, pp. 192-95. Voegelin (p. 194) comments on *berit* in 14:13 and 15:18, "the symbol of bondage has become the symbol of freedom."

significance was only to be revealed later. The distinctive designation of the ancestors' God is as the God of the fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Such phrases identify God by drawing attention to a link with a human individual and with the family he leads, wherever they may be. The distinctive faith of the people of God in the ancestors' times was thus one suited to their way of life. As they moved about, they needed God to guide them, provide for them, and be accessible to them as they traveled, and not to be limited to particular places. As a small landless group their concerns were with progeny and land, and these were their God's promise. It was such needs that the God of the fathers met; this God could be identified with El or with Yahweh, but that way of conceiving of God would not match their needs in the same way.

2 The Theocratic Nation

Moses is both the last representative of the ancestors' religion and the first adherent of the new faith of Israel that he mediates. God appears to him as the God of his father (Exod 3:6) and he keeps the ancestral leader's close relationship with the guiding and providing God. Sinai itself is like a manifestation to one of the ancestors writ large,¹¹ and Yahweh relates to Israel as one who chooses to attach himself to a group and then sets before them expectations of them, a promise to bless them, and an undertaking to accompany them in the vicissitudes of life in the everyday world.

Yahweh, Israel, and the relationship between them are thus congruent with what we have seen before. Yet the people of God is now in a new situation. The family has become a people, and one to be reckoned with (Exod 1:7, 9, 20). Expressions such as "Yahweh's people;" "your people," "my people," occur for the first time (Exod 3:7; 15:16; Num 11:29).

This increase is an evidence of Yahweh's blessing. On the other hand, Israel is a people in bondage. They have lost the freedom of the family in Genesis and become an oppressed minority enslaved in a foreign country. By rescuing them from this bondage, Yahweh makes them not only an 'am but an independent nation in their own right, a *goy*. The people of God becomes something not merely different in size, but different in nature. Israel is now a political entity with a place in the history books.¹² A further aspect of God's promise becomes reality (Gen 12:2; Exod 19:6; 33:13) and a further stage in the fulfillment of God's purpose is reached.

Yahweh thus enters a new sphere of activity as the God of the family becomes the God of history and the God of politics, battling with the Egyptian Pharaoh and defeating him. Yahweh meets the people's needs in a new mode of life, though this now involves Yahweh in taking one nation's side against another in a way. Yahweh also gains new stature as the lord of nature at whose bidding seas part and come together again, as the warrior whose fury brings a shiver even to the hearts of those who are its beneficiaries, as the master of the elements whose coming makes Sinai tremble (Exod 14; 15; 19-20). While being Israel's God, Yahweh "is not a national god *simpliciter*.... Yahweh is too much himself, too free of Israel, for that."¹³

¹¹ So G. Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972/London: SPCK, 1973), p. 81.

¹² Cf. the mention on Pharaoh Mer-ne-ptah's victory stela (see *ANET*, p. 378).

While the First Testament excludes war from its ideal picture of Beginning and End, and implies that Yahweh is not essentially warlike, it accepts wholeheartedly the warring activity of Yahweh in Israel's history (on their behalf and against them) which is a corollary of being involved with them as a nation at all. To be the God of all of life, Yahweh must be a God of war. Even this area is embraced by Israel's calling "to have the entirety of its life constructed out of its relation to the divine" so that "the separation of religion and politics that stretches through history is here overcome."¹⁴

This notion is summed up by the picture of Israel as Yahweh's kingdom (Exod 19:6); Israel's song of praise after the exodus comes to a climax with the assertion that Yahweh will reign as king over it for ever (Exod 15:18; cf. Num 23:21). Israel is a theocracy,¹⁵ Yahweh's personal property (*nakhalah, segullah, kheleq*: Exod 19:5; Deut 4:20), Yahweh's priesthood (Exod 19:6). Its human leaders do not reign by right as kings; they serve under and by the appointment of Yahweh and only for as long as Yahweh wills, and Yahweh is capable of directing Israel without using a human intermediary at all (Exod 13:21-22; 23:20-21).¹⁶ Its priestly clan cannot claim a position that goes back to the Beginning (the ancestors had no priest except the head of the household himself) or one that will last at the End (see Isa 61:6). They are a peculiar kind of nation with a peculiar kind of religion.

Israel has to be available to Yahweh to treat as a personal possession. Its status is its calling.¹⁷ This calling is itemized at Sinai: the obligation of the people of God now includes a detailed obedience in the ethical, social, and cultic spheres. The covenant shape of Deuteronomy makes the point especially clear. Like a human overlord laying down the law in a treaty, Yahweh the divine overlord lays down the law to this covenant people. Middle-Eastern law is the point of departure for Israel's, indeed, so that the most important distinctive feature of Israelite law is not so much its origin or actual content but its context in the covenant, in "the framework of relationship which breaks through that which is merely moral."¹⁸

This context, however, decisively influences the content of Israel's ethic, to the extent that it establishes the notion of the people of God as an ethical principle. In their behavior the people of God are bound to one another. Yahweh being their overlord, they have no human overlords. Theocracy and socio-political equality (radical theology and radical sociology) go together.¹⁹

¹³ T. C. Vriezen, *The Religion of Israel* London: Lutterworth/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), p. 132.

¹⁴ M. Buber, *Kingship of God* (New York: Harper/London: George Allen, 1967), pp. 118, 119, cf. p. 145.

¹⁵ Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.16-17 [171-75].

¹⁶ Judges 1 - 12 with its anti-monarchic attitude shows how the will towards actualizing Yahweh's kingship over Israel still lived (cf. Buber, *Kingship of God*, pp. 59-84, 164-69).

¹⁷ Cf. N. A. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes* (reprinted Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche, 1963), pp. 4, 12.

¹⁸ (J. J. Stamm and) M. E. Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (London: SCM/Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967), pp. 74-75.

¹⁹ Cf. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation*, pp. 16, 19-31. Gottwald sees theocracy or mono-Yahwism as "the function of sociopolitical equality" (*The Tribes of Yahweh*, p. 611; cf. pp. 622-49). He thus "demythologizes" the First Testament into sociology (p. 692) as Bultmann demythologizes the New Testament into anthropology in the sense of an understanding of the real possibilities of the individual's human existence (see, e.g., *Jesus Christ and Mythology* [New York: Scribner's, 1958/London: SCM, 1960], pp. 52-54). As Gottwald sees it, we are therefore not required to appropriate the First Testament's symbol

By stressing the declaring and accepting of Yahweh's will, the covenant motif emphasizes that it is not mere natural kinship that makes Israel a people. It is Yahweh's act and laying down of the law, and their submission to Yahweh as their covenant Lord, that make Israel Yahweh's people and make them one people.²⁰ Indeed, being born into the right family is not only insufficient but apparently unnecessary to give someone a place among Yahweh's people. A rather mixed company leaves Egypt with the Israelites (Exod 12:38; Num 11:4), Moses marries a Cushite (Num 12:1), only a Kenizzite matches the faith of Joshua (Num 13 - 14), and Yahweh's greatness is acknowledged by a Midianite priest, a Jericho prostitute, and the frightened inhabitants of Gibeon (Exod 18:11-12; Josh 2:1-11; 6:25; 9:9-10).

Most important may be the scene at Shechem where Joshua challenges his audience to be Yahweh's people rather than worshipers of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or Canaanite gods (Josh 24). At this town whose conquest has not been recorded and which apparently accepted Joshua and his God without resistance, perhaps a very mixed multitude, including many who had not taken part in the exodus, the covenant-making, or the victories under Joshua, now accepts the united worship of Yahweh. Even if this theory reads too much into Josh 24, the general point nevertheless holds that the covenant's stress on human response makes possible a greater openness to admitting foreigners into Yahweh's people. Israel is still understood in kinship terms and perhaps new members are effectively seen as adopted into the Israelite family (and receive a genealogy in keeping with their adoption); there is thus no one who does not belong to one of the clans. But the qualification for membership is not birth but willingness to commit oneself.

The biblical text itself suggests another reason for seeing Josh 24 as marking an important point in the story of the people of God. It marks the end of the major stage in Israel's occupation of the promised land, the land itself having now been distributed among the clans. The final aspect of the ancestral promise is fulfilled. The land becomes "the land of Israel," the holy land, Yahweh becomes the God of this particular country, Israel becomes the people of the land. Land, people, and faith are henceforth bound together.²¹

This line of thinking is a dangerous one. It threatens to reduce Yahweh's stature; it also obscures the fact that Israel had become Yahweh's people before the settlement, so that there is a sense in which actual possession of land was not intrinsic to the meaning of "Israel." Nor can Israel presume assured possession of the land, for this depends on continuing obedience to Yahweh. Its historians show how incomplete, precarious, and temporary was its lordship over it, while the fact that the land that had been named after the Canaanites was subsequently named after the Philistines is a parable of the uncertain, ambiguous nature of the relationship between "the land of Israel" and "the people of Israel."²²

The choice that Joshua presses on the people gathered at Shechem contrasts with the ancestors' easy acceptance of Canaanite El religion. The difference in

system by believing what ancient Israelites believed, but to follow them into freedom and the mastery of our social circumstances, developing such transcendent images as will help us fulfill that task (pp. 703-9). One can indeed read theology in light of sociology (and vice versa), but this does not establish that only one level of understanding is valid.

²⁰ See W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 1:39.

²¹ Cf. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes*, p. 17.

²² Cf. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes*, p. 19.

attitude may reflect the abhorrent nature of the religion of Baal, and/or the more exclusivist claims of the God of Moses, the jealous God, and/or Israel's vulnerability to the religion of the more sophisticated Canaanites, a danger whether Israel absorbs them or they absorb Israel, and/or the specific attractiveness of a religion geared to agricultural life, a realm in which Yahweh had not yet proved to be competent. Allowing Baal practices to enter Yahwism will lead to disaster; "saying 'No' to the Canaanite cult" becomes "*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*".²³

The danger that Israel and its distinctive faith would disappear after the occupation of Canaan was the more real as it entered a period when the clans were divided from each other by Canaanites and Philistines and when relations between them were rather loose. Yet their inclination to turn their back on Yahweh goes back into the wilderness period. Indeed, their complaints and their attempts to go back on their election calling begin when they are hardly out of Egypt (Exod 14 - 17). At Sinai Moses only delays a while on the mountain and Israel has hastened into a well-meaning but guilty assimilation to heathen religion, while in the tabernacle story no sooner is the priesthood consecrated than alien fire is offered on Yahweh's altar (Exod 32; Lev 10). "Embedded at the heart of the sacred tradition lies Israel's disobedience and rebellion";²⁴ the First Testament acknowledges the original sin of the people of God, a rebelliousness that goes back to their beginnings (cf. Ezek 16).

Yet Israel cannot get away from Yahweh. Formally they have opportunities to refuse the covenant relationship (Exod 24:3; Josh 24), but in reality it is too late for that, and these are only occasions for public plighting of troth. Israel cannot go back to Egypt. They can attempt to ignore Yahweh, but they will find that Yahweh will not let them alone.

3 The Institutional State

The judges period establishes that Israel cannot exist in Canaan as a Yahwistic nation. Social, moral, religious, and political pressures threaten to demolish both their inner and outer life. Although God's promises have been fulfilled and Israel lives in Yahweh's land as Yahweh's people, its subsequent experience is an unhappy one. It returns to a life not so different from the one it had once known in Egypt.

Although the rule of the individual leaders of this period was occasional and limited, it showed that with strong leadership, crises can be overcome, and the latter part of Judges adds to its lament "everyone did what was right in their own eyes" the explanation "there was no king in Israel" (e.g., Judg 21:35). There was thus a historical inevitability about the transition from (nominally) theocratic nation to monarchic state. The alternative to such a development was to cease to exist. Thus this transition takes Israel from fragmentation to the peak of its historical achievement in the time of David and Solomon. Both the writing of connected history and the development of Wisdom may reflect the monarchy's opening people's eyes to the regularities and interconnections of human life.

²³ G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd/New York: Harper, 1962), 1:25.

²⁴ B. S. Childs, *Exodus* (London: SCM, 1974) = *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), p. 579.

The monarchy also brings developments in Israel's worship as Canaanite forms are allowed to influence the worship of the Jerusalem temple, and the worship of El is once more appropriated by the worshipers of Yahweh. Like the development of Wisdom, this is a matter of inner beliefs as well as outward form. Yahweh becomes more explicitly the universal sovereign and creator who rules the world through a Davidic viceroy in Yahweh's chosen city (see Pss 2; 46 – 48; 93; 96 – 99; Isa 2:2-4). The story of the acts of God continues in the covenant with David and the building of the temple, and even the failure of the kings generally leads not to disillusion with kingship but to the hope of a future king who will fulfill the kingship ideal. Human kingship can be a means of Yahweh's kingship receiving more effective concrete expression in the encouraging of justice, peace, and true religion.

Von Rad thus portrays the "Canaanisation of Jahwism" as an enriching of Israelite faith that enables its own inherent dynamic to emerge more clearly.²⁵ But this "paganization" of Israel can be evaluated much more negatively.²⁶ It includes the narrowing of Yahwism to a matter of piety and worship and a divorcing of Yahwism from politics, justice, and fertility, and of these from each other. The monarchy encourages the replacement of a clan system by a class system, with its inequalities, unfairnesses, and excesses (cf. 1 Sam 8:10-18; 1 Kings 21). Like the transition from family to people or nation, becoming an institutional state turned Israel into a different entity, and one with the same structure as other contemporary states: there was no other model to follow. The "liberation theology" of the exodus tradition no longer began where a national state found itself, even if in reality the monarchy meant that "Israel had reversed the Exodus and re-entered the Sheol of civilizations."²⁷ Further, the request for a king implies the rejection of Yahweh as king (1 Sam 8:7). Theocracy is incompatible with any humanly devised form of settled government; earthly leaders must be those Yahweh appoints, and they have authority only until Yahweh removes them.

Although Yahweh allows the introduction of institutional leadership, henceforth there is always the possibility of a clash between the institution Yahweh once established and the person without strictly institutional authority who nevertheless declares "thus says Yahweh," and who may be right. Indeed, the real activity of Yahweh is now more clearly seen confronting the institutions of Israel (not necessarily from outside, since prophets had a place in cult or court) because they have not taken the rule of Yahweh seriously and held together faith, fertility, politics, and social order. The prophets take up the key question of the relationship between the sovereignty of the human king and that of the divine king, the question of "the politics of God and the politics of man."²⁸

The tension between prophecy and kingship is paralleled by tensions between prophecy and priesthood and prophecy and Wisdom; the period of the institutional state is also the period of the first temple and of the development of Israelite Wisdom. Priesthood can encourage stability in a vital religion by the use of sacred forms, application of that religion to life by means of teaching and counseling, costly self-offering to God in response to God's self-giving, safeguarding of the true faith, and personal encounter with God; it can also encourage people to replace divine lordship by human authoritarianism, divine

²⁵ So von Rad, *OT Theology* 1:19-30.

²⁶ So G. E. Mendenhall, "The Monarchy," *Interpretation* 29 (1975):155-70.

²⁷ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p.142.

²⁸ Cf. J. Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

nearness by divine inaccessibility, ethical commitment by outward observances, and openness to God by attempts to manipulate God and human beings. The wise can enable the affairs of state and family life, as these are lived together before Yahweh, to be conducted in accordance with the nature of the world as Yahweh makes it function; or they can enable people to organize their lives in such a way as to eliminate Yahweh from them. The verdict of the prophets whose work is preserved in the First Testament is that the ambiguity of kingship, priesthood, and wisdom is generally resolved in the period of the institutional state by the latter sets of tendencies coming to predominate.

The account of the monarchy's origin (1 Sam 8 - 12) illustrates the First Testament's ambivalence about kingship, which reflects the ambiguity of this institution itself. "Without the monarchy, the Israel of the confederacy might have disappeared without leaving much of a trace in history; with the monarchy, it survived but betrayed the Mosaic institutions."²⁹ Apparently Israel could develop only in this way. It could not ask whether it was better to be "charismatic" or "institutional"; it could ask only how it was to be what historical forces compelled it to be. It had discovered what being a Yahwistic theocracy meant, though it had not succeeded in realizing the ideal. Now it was challenged to discover being a Yahwistic institution meant.³⁰

It failed here, too, and ultimately the institutional state is put under the judgment of Yahweh that the prophets declared. Yet this "No" to Israel as it exists is not a casting off of Yahweh's elect people. The "No" is, indeed, designed to elicit a response from it.³¹

4 The Afflicted Remnant

Prophecy thus demands a reversal of the paganization of Israel; the alternative is a judgment that would decimate the people.

Although the picture of Israel surviving judgment as a mere remnant begins as a negative idea, the fact that a remnant will survive becomes a basis for hope. The felled tree can produce new growth; the decimated nation can increase again. Beyond judgment there will be deliverance, because it is still true that Yahweh has taken hold of Israel and will not let it go.

In some sense the remnant preexists the exile; it goes back at least to Elijah and the seven thousand who refused to acknowledge Baal, and it persists in Jeremiah, Baruch, and those associated with them. When a remnant survives judgment, however, it does not do so because of its righteousness; its survival is of grace. The call to the remnant to be righteous is made on the basis of the fact that it has been preserved. It is exhorted to give Yahweh the response that should characterize the whole people; after being a warning and a promise, the remnant idea becomes a challenge (Isa 10:20-21; Ezek 18).

²⁹ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 180. Thus alongside the negative view expressed in parts of 1 Sam 8 - 12, the appointment of a *nagid* is the gift of Yahweh's saving initiative (1 Sam 9:16), and Saul is made king before Yahweh (1 Sam 11:15). Judges, too, combines a negative attitude (Judg 8 - 9) with a positive one (Judg 17:6; 21:25).

³⁰ There is a strand of idealism in the enthusiasm of Gottwald and Mendenhall for the "Mosaic" period, which has not faced up to the failure of the theocratic order.

³¹ Cf. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes*, p. 32.

Thus, when God abandons the people as a whole, it is not to turn to the individual.³² Perhaps one can say that the origin of the idea of the church lies in the idea of the remnant;³³ even if so, the remnant idea does not signify the abandoning of the idea of a people of God. It is rather a means of its continuance.

The end of the northern kingdom comes soon after the emergence of the "writing prophets"; Judah's political, moral, social, and spiritual disorder also portends its own judgment. Before the axe actually falls on the tree, Josiah makes a final attempt to preserve it whole by providing the turning back that Torah and prophets demand, seeking to implement Deuteronomy's vision of a holy nation and insisting that the whole (surviving) people commit itself to living in light of its election as the people of God in every aspect of its life (inner attitude, cultic practice, social life, religious commitment, moral standard).³⁴

If their inadequacy was not apparent in his lifetime, Josiah's reforms died with him. His sons' reigns see religious, social, and ethical degeneration. The Josianic reform comes to a "miscarriage" that reflects the story of Genesis-Kings as a whole.³⁵ There is a more profound problem about Israel's human nature than can be solved by a book of teaching. A new kind of circumcision, a new kind of relationship to this teaching, and a new kind of covenant are needed (Deut 30:6; Jer 31:31-34). The idea of Israel being the people of God becomes future prospect, not present reality (Jer 31:1; Ezek 11:20; cf. Hos 1:9 - 2:3, 25 [2:1, 23]).

As with the transition from theocratic nation to institutional state, there is a certain logic about the failure of the institution that turns it into a remnant. To the extent that the people of God is where the kingship of God is a reality (a notion given outward form by the theocratic nation), it forms a microcosm of what the whole world is called to be. But in that this kingship is in practice rejected, this people becomes instead a microcosm of what the world itself also is. If the state's importance and sovereignty compete with those of God, it has to be judged.³⁶ The people of God is not a means of God's revelation, but a threat to it; for the sake of that revelation, the Israel of the day therefore has to be cast off. The people of God has no security independent of its obedience. It is not indispensable; rather, God will be revealed through it by judging, if not by blessing. It thus represents in microcosm the judgment of all those who go against God.

Although the exile makes into a reality the nightmare that Israel will be reduced to a mere remnant, its religion absorbs the experience of exile rather than being absorbed by it. The survivors take up anew the challenge to keep Yahweh's instruction, meditate anew on the lessons to be learned from their history as a people, and ask anew whether there might be some future for them. It is, however, a demoralized remnant that hears a second Isaiah proclaiming that they are God's people, that they are not finished, that they are Yahweh's servant and have not been abandoned by Yahweh.

³² Cf. T. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (revised ed., Oxford: Blackwell/Newton, MA: Branford, 1970), p. 358

³³ So Otto Eissfeldt, "Geschichtliches und Übergeschichtliches im Alten Testament," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 109/2 (1947): 9-23 (pp. 10, 13).

³⁴ Cf. Eissfeldt, "Geschichtliches und Übergeschichtliches im Alten Testament," p. 15.

³⁵ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, "Prophecy and Fulfillment," in C. Westermann (ed.), *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: Knox, 1963) = *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1963), pp. 50-75 (pp. 72-75).

³⁶ Cf. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation*, p. 100.

In Isa 40 – 55, the description of Israel as Yahweh's servant is the key motif to designate Israel as the people of God. Their servanthood is the guarantee of God's concern for them (Isa 41:8-10). It also implies their responsibility to God (Isa 42:1-4, 5-9). The trouble is that they are too deaf and blind to meet this responsibility, and in need of enlightenment themselves (Isa 42:18-20). God first promises to restore them to the land, though the anointed king through whom God will do this is not a son of David such as Jehoiachin or Zerubbabel but the Persian Cyrus (Isa 45:1). They need to be "on the way," however, in another sense, on the way from sin to new creation,³⁷ and the prophet hears Yahweh's summons to minister to these inner needs, to be the servant to them, and to accept the affliction this will bring (Isa 49:1-6; 50:4-9).

The last major servant passage (Isa 52:13 – 53:12) develops the motif of the servant's affliction, which has been gaining increasing prominence through Isa 40 – 55. The portrait of Yahweh's arm revealed in this servant's humiliation suggests that it is through the servant's acceptance of affliction and suffering, not through the exercise of triumphant power, that humanity's personal needs find their fulfillment. It would be an oversimplification to say that Israel is this servant (earlier chapters have made it clear that Israel needs to receive such a ministry) or that the prophet is the servant. Yet to the extent that Israel is God's servant at all, this is its calling, and both the nation's experience of exile (which for some Israelites was undeserved, though Isa 40 – 55 does not explicitly refer to this point) and the prophet's experience of opposition contribute to the insight expressed in this portrait. The calling of the people of God is the calling of the servant, the calling of the servant is a call to die. That is the exile's deepest insight on what it means to be the people of God.

5 The Community of the Promise

In later times, the notion of exile or dispersion deeply influenced both Jewish and Christian thinking about the people of God.³⁸ The same is true of the servant idea, which both Jews and Christians can see as a (if not the) high point of the First Testament. Yet the idea all but disappears from the First Testament after the exile, except for enigmatic passages such as Zech 12:10 – 13:1 and Dan 11:32 – 12:3. It seems to have exercised little influence on ideas of what it means to be God's people after the return. Not unnaturally, the glorious promises of restoration were what caught people's enthusiasm.

In the event, the restoration fell far short of the glory of these promises, as Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra 1 – 6 make clear. It is no triumphant return winning all the nations' acknowledgment of Yahweh. Though free to return to their land, Israel remains a subject people. In a way history does repeat itself; the situation in Ezra 4 resembles that of the judges period. The question now is how such a subject people can live faithfully as the people of Yahweh.³⁹

Israel actually threw off statehood along with monarchy with remarkable ease; "the state as such was somewhat of a borrowed garment for Israel."⁴⁰ They had been the people of Yahweh before, and could be after. They had been the

³⁷ Yves Congar, "The Church," *Concilium* (London) 1/1: 7-19 (p. 15).

³⁸ For the latter, see, e.g., 1 Peter 1:1.

³⁹ Cf. P. R. Ackroyd, *The Chronicler in his Age* (JSOTSup 101 (Sheffield : Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 13.

⁴⁰ Von Rad, *OT Theology*, 1:90.

Israelite *qahal*, the assembled community, before, and they could be again. Becoming a community does not mean becoming a church in the sense of a body with no awareness of itself as a people; the *qahal* bears a people's traditions and hopes.⁴¹ Yet as a people they are in a different position because they have been through nationhood, the experience of Yahweh acting in their political history, and the receiving of Yahweh's promise to do so again. They are now the community of promise. The failure of the promise to live up to expectations forces Israel to find ways of living with God's promises; it leads to the emergence of at least four models of what it must mean to be the people of God now.

First, the First Testament's chief postexilic narrative presentation of Israel's story portrays Israel as a *worshiping* community. This understanding presupposes that God's promises have been fulfilled in the restoration: God is still present and active with Israel. The "branch" may have disappeared, but the high priest has not:⁴² Yahweh's activity is seen in political events (the Persian authorities serve Yahweh), though more significantly in Israel's religious life, which Yahweh established in the first place and where the promises of the prophets are fulfilled. Yahweh calls the Israelite *qahal* to be also the *'edah*, the community gathered for worship. It is this that Ezra established,⁴³ and this that the Chronicler provides with its ideological base, still, significantly, in the form of narrative history. Of course Israel had been a worshiping community from the beginning, and Ezekiel's prophecies had this at the center of their vision. Indeed, "a theology that saw Israel's existence in the eyes of Jahweh as so strongly conditioned by praise" could hardly have "strayed so very far from the proper road."⁴⁴

In theory, at least, the community welcomes all who are willing to join God's people in Jerusalem to worship with it; yet there is an unresolved tension in its attitude to outsiders. It is still a people, organized by clan and family, as Chronicles especially emphasizes. Indeed, community leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah perceive a need to close the ranks against alien influence if Israel is to survive as a distinct entity in the pressures of their time. They are less tolerant of the "mixed multitude" than Moses had been (Neh 13:1-3). Such a protectionism may have enabled Judaism to survive, even if it could not enable it to triumph.⁴⁵

Second, other Jews approached exilic prophecy in a different way and saw the people of God as called to be a *waiting* community. If God could not be seen as presently active in history, faith's response was not to narrow God's sphere of activity to a worship focus, but to look to God's future. One should not despise the day of small things, but one should not be satisfied with it either. The time will come when God brings to an end this God-forsaken order of history in judgment and deliverance.

Some of the tensions between the vision of the worshiping community and that of the waiting community perhaps reflect the respective positions of different groups in the power structure of the postexilic community as a whole. Yet they are also intelligible as alternative responses to a real problem of faith. Nor should the tensions between those who hold these viewpoints be exaggerated. Visionaries such as Ezekiel, Haggai, and Zechariah have a temple-focused faith, and worship-focused works such as Ezra-Nehemiah still look to the future for God to bring

⁴¹ Cf. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes*, 36.

⁴² Cf. Vriezen, *An Outline of OT Theology*, p. 360.

⁴³ So K. Koch, "Ezra and the Origins of Judaism," *JSS* 19 (1974): 173-97.

⁴⁴ Von Rad's comment on Chronicles, *OT Theology* 1:354.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. H. Chamberlayne, *Man in Society* (London: Epworth, 1966), p. 176.

about a more satisfactory restoration of the people's fortunes than the one they experience in the present. Both perspectives are concerned for purity over against outside influence; they stand together over against the views of the Jews of Elephantine and of those who were prepared to accept (or to take up arms against) the Hellenizing pressures of the Maccabean crisis. A concern for purity over against outside influence thus involves a concern for purity within the people of God, and this, too, both perspectives share. The division between righteous and wicked is not only one between Israel and the world but one within Israel.

Third, others emphasize *obeying* the Torah. In the context of the covenant the instructions in the Torah function as an expression of God's grace that provide people with the framework for a response to God's acts. After the exile, the instructions seem to function more independently of the covenant, and gain a central place in their own right as a means of people relating to God. The Torah is the direct object of the believer's meditation, delight, hope, longing, trust, and love (e.g., Ps 19:8-15 [7-14J; 119:14-16, 40-49]).

In Mendenhall's view, postexilic Israel becomes for the first time ethnocentric, not least in connection with its observance of the Torah (see Neh 13).⁴⁶ It is implausible in this way either to remove the ethnic base from early Israel, or to remove the confessional base from the postexilic community, for the idea of conversion to Judaism, of becoming a Jew by taking on the demands of the law, begins in postexilic Judaism.⁴⁷ It is the postexilic community's focusing on the Torah that opens up the possibility that any who respond to it, whatever their race, can belong to Yahweh's people—the openness illustrated by Ruth and Jonah. Yet this same focusing on the Torah issues in the more exclusive attitudes of Ezra and Nehemiah.

There are other drawbacks about an emphasis on the Torah. Turning Israel's faith into a religion of a book releases the community from having to listen for the living word and from the tension of living with God in history.⁴⁸ It may imply that the relationship between God and people depends on people rather than on God, and may turn the religion that had been Israel's freedom at the beginning of their story into their bondage at the end of their story.⁴⁹ Yet with this faith, Jews can live without national existence, staying on in Babylon and Egypt. They can find a unity based on commitment to the Torah,⁵⁰ a commitment that embodies Deuteronomy's demand for a response of love, trust, and fear, and brings a fulfillment of the vision of people's hearts being circumcised and of the law being written on them (Deut 30:6; Jer 31:33). Here is the birth of a confessing church.

The fourth model is *questioning*; even more than the third, it appeals as much to the individual as to the community as such. The postexilic community is usually reckoned to be the home of the First Testament's most serious wrestling with doubt and uncertainty, in Job and Ecclesiastes. Here the exceptions to the confident affirmations that characterize Proverbs are felt more keenly than are the

⁴⁶ *The Tenth Generation*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Cf. J. Milgrom, "Religious Conversion and the Revolt Model for the Formation of Israel," *JBL* 101 (1982): 169-76.

⁴⁸ So Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 374.

⁴⁹ Cf. G. E. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *BA* 25 (1962): 66-87 (pp. 86-87). Julius Wellhausen saw individual commitment to the Torah as the essence of postexilic religion and evaluated it negatively (*Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (reprinted Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), e.g., pp. 424-25).

⁵⁰ Cf. Koch, "Ezra and the Origins of Judaism," p. 197.

rules themselves. The fact that the rules do not always work will have been apparent before the exile, and doubt and uncertainty about basic affirmations of the faith find periodic expression throughout First Testament times. The exceptions can be accommodated as long as people retain a living conviction that the world does make sense, a conviction reinforced in Israel by the experience of God's great acts of redemption in their history. But the exodus is now ancient history, and it is a demanding venture of faith to recognize the restoration as a genuine new exodus. Disappointment with historical experience seems likely to have contributed to doubt becoming so articulate in Job and Ecclesiastes. In their circles within the postexilic community, it feels impossible to make the ancient faith very meaningful. They recognize that there is nowhere else to look for answers; the situation can be faced only by discovering new bases for believing in Yahweh. But they find it is easier to pose questions than to reach satisfying answers.

6 The Continuing Story in Judaism and Christianity

We have reached the end of the story of the people of God as the First Testament reflects it, yet that story has not come to a proper conclusion. "Colonial dependence" in the Persian and early Greek periods is followed by "wars of independence; controlled independence; and then a last revolt leading to annihilation."⁵¹ From either a rabbinic or a primitive Christian perspective this postcanonical history of the people of God involves a repoliticization that is discredited by its results.⁵²

Rabbinic Judaism sees itself as taking up where the First Testament leaves off. The ghetto comes to stand not only for the Jewish people's continuing calling to a distinctive obedience, but also for its continuing election to the suffering of the servant, in which once again its God is revealed.⁵³ Zionism preserved the vision of being "a model for the redemption of the entire human race."⁵⁴ Understandably tired of being treated as the afflicted remnant, however, it has once again repoliticized its life and sought to be a nation like the other nations, guided as much by Joshua, the Maccabees, and Bar Kochba as by Moses, and experiencing the same effectiveness as it once enjoyed under David and Solomon, with the same risks.

A Christian perspective is more impressed by the lines that lead from the First Testament to Jesus than by those that lead to Rabbinic Judaism; it finds the continuing existence of the Jewish people a theological puzzle. Among the streams of thought represented in the late First Testament period, Jesus has obvious affinities with the community waiting for the coming of the Day of Yahweh, but it is to representatives of the worshiping community that the coming of this Day is first announced (Luke 1:5-25), while Jesus reckons that the community concerned with

⁵¹ A. Dumas, *Political Theology and the Life of the Church* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), p. 118.

⁵² So Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation*, 101; H. J. Schoeps, "Faith and the Jewish Law Today," in G. Hedenquist (ed.), *The Church and the Jewish People* (London: Edinburgh House, 1954), pp. 63-76 (p. 65).

⁵³ Cf. K. H. Rengstorff, "The Jewish Problem and the Church's Understanding of its own Mission," in *The Church and the Jewish People*, pp. 27-46 (pp. 34-35).

⁵⁴ David Ben Gurion, quoted by A. Elon and S. Hassan, *Between Enemies* (London: Deutsch/New York: Random House, 1974), p. 12.

obeying the Torah ought also to find itself drawn to him (John 5:39), and the new revelation and new events he brings offer some response to the doubt and questioning of those for whom the traditional faith no longer carries conviction. Thus Jesus addresses himself to Israel and forms around him the nucleus of a responsive remnant of Israel: not a replacement people of God, but a group through whom Israel as a whole will be reached.

In fact, Israel as a whole does not recognize him him. As there were lines that could lead from the First Testament to Jesus, there were others that could lead to Rabbinic Judaism, to his rejection, and to the First Testament's own miscarriage. Not that the church can then dispense with Israel; to attempt to do so is "perilously like playing Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark,"⁵⁵ and Israel still belongs to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile it is the remnant that receives the Holy Spirit, the distinctive foretaste of the End with its blessings, which makes it the community that both lives by and looks for the End of all things. It becomes the church, the gathered community; Christian faith is no less corporate, no more individualistic, than First Testament faith was. Far from settling down as a remnant, it is expected to take an essentially outward-looking, open stance, expectant of growing into not only the fullness of Israel but the fullness of the gentiles, who are fellow-heirs with the saints in a body that sees itself as the same old people of God yet at the same time as a new entity in which ethnic distinctions cease to count. All become one in Christ Jesus, for the people of God now focuses on a person, on shared relationships with him, and on a shared acknowledgment of him as Lord. It is called to preach and to embody his calling as the crucified one, relying on the cross, accepting the cross, and preaching the cross.

On the way to the cross, Jesus had gone through stages in his ministry that in part parallel Israel's experience.⁵⁶ He had the power to be the mighty one of Mal 3, exercised the ministry of liberator and deliverer described in Isa 35 and 61, had the opportunity to become the messianic king of Israel, but found his true calling in the role of the afflicted servant of Isa 40 – 55.

The church's own story also manifests parallels to Israel's. Perhaps the patterns and recurring developments can be accounted for in sociological terms: the turning of theocracy into state and of church into institution are examples of developments one can perceive in culture and history, while any beleaguered remnant may well cope with and survive its minority situation by turning in on itself.⁵⁷ Thus, like Israel, the church begins as a family and starts to spread through the known world under God's direct leadership. It begins to need ordered leadership and to institutionalize the Spirit's lordship. With Constantine, it comes to be accepted by the world and to operate in the world like the world, often on the basis of the world's agenda. With the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, in Europe it becomes an exiled remnant, though in some ways thus finds itself. Like postexilic Israel, it then lives with a tension between the way scripture describes the church's significance and the insignificance of its place in the world, often coping with this experience by means of similar devices to Israel's: the

⁵⁵ G. S. Sloyan, "Who are the People of God?" in A. Finkel and L. Frizzel (ed.), *Standing before God* (J. M. Oesterreicher Festschrift; New York: Ktav, 1981), pp. 103-14 (p. 113).

⁵⁶ For what follows, see J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), pp. 80-83.

⁵⁷ So P. L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (reprinted Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), pp. 31-34.

agnostic faith of the theological community, or individualistic piety, or a concentration on the church's internal affairs and life of worship, or an escape into hope and striving for a coming Kingdom that contrasts with the present one.

7 Permanent Insights

These models of what it means to be the people of God are all part of the canonical history; all thus contain material open for our appropriation. The question it then suggests is whether the self-understanding to which Israel gave expression in one or other of these First Testament contexts is distinctively helpful to us in our context in enabling us to perceive what it means for us to be the people of God.

It is not enough that we should simply feel free to choose from the First Testament story those insights that we find immediately helpful. The very way the tradition develops reflects the conviction that the insights of earlier periods must be brought to bear on later ones; what it meant to be the people of God in Abraham's time does not cease to be relevant when Israel is no longer a homeless family. J and P, for instance, speak to the institutional state and the afflicted remnant by retelling the stories of the family, with their radical implications for each. Arguably the different traditions become more, not less, important when they offer insights that derive from a quite different social and historical experience.

Conversely, the subsequent history of particular First Testament traditions or motifs is relevant to our interpretation of the significance of these traditions as they appear earlier. This later history may allow hidden tensions to be revealed or visible tensions to be resolved, intrinsic difficulties to emerge or open questions to be faced, confident affirmations to be qualified or situational overemphases to be set in a broader context. Even if we find it instinctively easy to identify with one model of being the people of God, we must see this model in the context of the others to which it is historically linked. Precisely because the various modes of being the people of God were linked historically and developed from each other, they may be expected to convey insights of permanent significance.

First, being a wandering family speaks of closeness of relationship, in the present and through the generations. It speaks of mutual love and concern, of the people of God as a brotherhood and sisterhood in which conflict is overcome by reconciliation, and to which all belong as equal partners.⁵⁸ Here "the whole of existence is defined by the communal form of the family, a pre- and a-political form of existence."⁵⁹ It speaks of being a people on the way, between promise and fulfillment, and dependent on the God whose will brought it into being (it did not come into being by the initiative of human beings individually or corporately) to take it to its destiny by whatever route God chooses, willing to sacrifice all securities (even God-given ones) in order to keep receiving the good things of this world anew as the gifts of the God of this world.⁶⁰ It must not mean a group turned

⁵⁸ Cf. Dumas, *Political Theology and the Life of the Church*, pp. 24-42; M. C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1980), pp. 39-42.

⁵⁹ C. Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say about God?* (London: SPCK/Atlanta: Knox, 1979), p. 83.

⁶⁰ Cf. A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), p. 170, J. Macquarrie, *The Faith of the People of God* (London: SCM/New York: Scribner's, 1972), pp. 21-22.

in on itself, which rests on the mere fact of genetic relationship rather than acknowledging the importance of historical choice, and which may even become settled in an unsettled way of life.

Second, being a theocratic nation speaks of the evident blessing of God demonstrated in the increase God gives; of the experience of God keeping promises, of God's direct leading and God's people following, of human leadership not allowed to obscure God's kingship and of the priesthood of the whole people not annulled by the existence of a priestly clan. It speaks of living in the world and of learning from it, but of standing over against the world and its religion, though being willing to welcome others to the same commitment to Yahweh as King and Lord that the people themselves must make. It must not mean a confidence in God that produces a false confidence in themselves, in their position and their response to God; the theocratic nation especially has to recognize that it is the rebellious nation that cannot exist in the world as the theocracy because of its sin.

Third, being an institutional state means that God starts with the people where they are; if they cannot cope with God's highest way, God carves out a lower one. When they do not respond to the spirit of Yahweh or when all sorts of spirits lead them into anarchy, Yahweh provides them with the institutional safeguard of earthly rulers. It speaks of an openness to learn from the world, to let the world provide the vehicles for expressing the faith, and to attract the world to that faith. It must not mean that the style of the nations becomes the style of the people of God, or that the institution quenches the Spirit and its rulers replace God, or that the gifts of God come to be viewed as inalienable possessions or as rights that God has to defend.⁶¹

Fourth, being an afflicted remnant means recognizing that the final purpose of God cannot be effected in the regular course of human history, because of the waywardness both of God's people and of other nations. It means that God's people are subject to judgment, but that all is not lost when God cuts them down to size. It means reaching one's furthest influence on the world not through the exercise of the world's power or by sharing the world's faith and attitudes but by accepting the affliction that comes from confronting the world, in the awareness that the call of the servant is a call to die. It must not mean trusting in being those who have escaped judgment (for this came about by God's grace), or settling down to being the remnant in a ghetto, or morbidly courting martyrdom.

Fifth, being a community of promise suggests a complex set of challenges of its own: of a people that faces up to facts yet recognizes that even when history ceases to be the sphere in which God's ultimate purpose is fulfilled through them, it does not cease to be the sphere in which they actually have to live; that is honest about what they can believe yet pledged to making sense of the old faith; that is committed to personal discipleship if the corporate seems to lapse; that lives as a people dedicated to praise for what Yahweh has done yet to hope for what Yahweh is yet to do.⁶²

Sixth, being God's people means being especially God's, especially responsible to God, and especially likely to reject the Messiah.

Seventh, being God's people means being grasped by the Holy Spirit without being susceptible to the influence of other spirits, being taken out of the world without becoming isolated from the world, accepting the lordship of Christ, the

⁶¹ Cf. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, p. 169.

⁶² As Congar puts it, the "not yet" must not be allowed to take all the truth from the "is now" ("The Church," p. 16) - or vice versa.

mission of Christ, but also the cross of Christ.⁶³ It means recognizing that the church remains sinful and that even the New Testament embraces a concern with law (Matthew), with institutional ministry (the Pastorals), with individualism (John), and with the visionary future (Revelation).

These insights suggested by what it means in different periods to be the people of God may be set up thus as antitheses: they should be this, they should not be that. But the tragic paradox of the people of God is that they are both at once. They are “my people” but “not my people”; a means of God’s purpose being effected and also the biggest obstacle to that end; the agent of God’s being revealed and the means of God’s being obscured; a microcosm of what the world is called to be and a microcosm of what the world already is; set apart and sanctified but also rebellious and indistinguishable from the world; separated from the nations and also a mixed multitude; the event by which God gives expression to the divine will and the anti-event by which God’s will is frustrated.

8 Recurring Questions

Such generalizations lead from a diachronic approach to the material on the people of God, an approach that looks at what it means to be God’s people in different ages, to a synchronic approach, which asks what issues recur throughout this material. There are certain constants about the First Testament’s underlying understanding of the people of God, “family resemblances” that generally appear. God’s people is that entity brought into existence by God’s historical choice, which lives by God’s promise and is the heir of God’s blessing. It is that entity where God’s kingship is to be made a reality corporately, in a body and not merely in individuals; that entity that accepts God’s lordship and follows God’s leading. It is a visible body; even where there is a distinction drawn between so-called Israel and real Israel, that is not a distinction between a visible church and an invisible one. And it lives in the world and in history in order that it may model there the calling of a people of God, which it is the destiny of all peoples to share.

Such constants that underlie the changing form of the people of God may, however, be less striking and less illuminating than the series of questions that recur throughout the material.

First, what is the relationship between life in the Spirit and life in the world? In Abraham’s time, God’s people ignore the world and live before God, but eventually find themselves under the world in Egypt. With Moses begins the glorious experiment in which the tension between religion and politics is overcome. But eventually Israel finds itself in a state of religious and moral anarchy—one indeed presaged from the start by the rebellions of Israel—and of political subjection. The monarchy triumphs in the world (at first) but on the whole fails in the realm of the Spirit. The exile again brings earthly humiliation, but new insights to some, though one should not assume a responsiveness on the part of the exiles as a whole. These insights include the belief that outward affliction may be the means of (others’) growth in the Spirit (the servant), though the prophets and preachers of the exile do not abandon the parallel vision of political triumph. The restoration sees only a partial realization of either vision, and the First Testament thus leaves us with a vision unfulfilled. Israel’s story suggests that the relationship between life in the Spirit and life in the world is insoluble. The people

⁶³ See further E. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 257-59.

of God cannot live as a political theocracy ruling the world in Yahweh's name, but neither can it take the way of separation that evades life in the world.⁶⁴ Nor is there any way of living in obedience to God and being organized for existence in history.⁶⁵ History, politics, and statehood, though inevitable, make it difficult to live as the people of God. The New Testament has little to add to this First Testament picture, and church history confirms it.

Second, what is the relationship under God between divine rule and human leadership, and between institutional order and individual freedom and responsibility? The ancestral leader is taken hold of and guided by God and there is no question of others deciding for themselves where and how they will live their lives; the leader is father, king, and priest. The theocracy emphasizes Yahweh's lordship but the people are slow to follow and both kingship and priesthood fulfill a need for institutional leadership, though not without compromising Yahweh's own position, as the rise of the prophets as an alternative order witnesses. The New Testament sees the Spirit given to the whole community (or perhaps vice versa), but still the community can be led astray by individuals, and the New Testament develops the features of an institution for similar reasons to the First Testament's.

Third, what is the relationship between triumph and affliction? The story of the ancestors is arguably one that takes them from glory to humiliation (in precise contradiction to what had been promised to Abraham), and for no apparent purpose. In the exodus and conquest Israel experiences triumph, but this is followed by humiliation again in the judges period; the pattern repeats itself in the monarchy and exile. Here, however, while political restoration is promised, a new vision appears. It may not be the case that only triumph can win people for God: affliction may do so too. Though the notion of Israel's call to suffering is not further developed in the First Testament, it has become significant in later Jewish theology. Israel's very election seems to be one to suffering. In the New Testament, suffering is seen as both preceding glory and as itself a peculiar form of glory, both for Jesus and for the church.

Fourth, what is the relationship between "Yahweh the God of Israel" and "Yahweh the lord of the world"? Israel's story is set on the broadest canvas, the creation of the whole cosmos and the forming of the first human pair by Yahweh Elohim, Yahweh who *is* God, who is worshiped as such from the beginning. The experiences of the ancestors and of Israel were to be only a paradigm of what God purposed for the whole world. Yet Yahweh's concern with the rest of the world for its own sake is not prominent in the First Testament. The world is as often seen as the locus of sin before God and enmity toward Israel (and therefore to be punished) as it is seen as living in ignorance and need (and therefore to be saved). Jesus' ministry is concerned only with Israel, and despite the great commission, there is an air of afterthought about the New Testament's suggestion that the purpose behind the delay in the consummation is that this provides an opportunity for the gathering in of the gentiles.

Fifth, what is the relationship between faith in Yahweh and the cultures of other peoples? When the world's concerns are marginal to Israel's and the world's beliefs are less misguided than they might be, God's people are not afraid to identify with it. When they are confronting the world and the world is more degenerate, they resist and attack its beliefs; they thus give expression to their calling to be the people of *Yahweh*. When Israel is itself a power in the world, it

⁶⁴ Cf. H. W. Hertzberg, *Werdende Kirche im Alten Testament* (Munich: Kaiser, 1950), p. 23.

⁶⁵ Cf. Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, 183.

allows the nations to influence it, though not without a price being paid. When Israel is being reduced to a remnant and dominated by the world, it again resists the world's beliefs and emphasizes practices that distinguish it. When Israel is lord of its own domain but still under the world's higher overlordship, it is wary still of alien influence and increasingly longing for people to make their individual commitment to Yahweh's way. When Israel ventures confidently with the gospel into the gentile world it is not afraid to reconceptualize that gospel in the terms of Hellenism/Gnosticism. Israel's willingness to be influenced by other cultures is part of its own theologizing; it is also a chief way in which Israel falls into sin and fails to maintain a distinctive faith in Yahweh. The tension between the positive and the negative aspects to this willingness cannot be resolved.

Sixth, what is the relationship between the people of God as a vision and the people of God in reality? The theological statements made about Israel are characteristically larger than life; in that they never correspond to visible reality, they are always open to the explicit forward-looking reinterpretation that they eventually receive. The designation of Israel as God's people is not merely a descriptive statement; it is promissory and also prescriptive. There is a danger inherent in the descriptive interpretation (cf. Jer 7:10; Matt 3:9). The image may be absolutized and turned into an idol.⁶⁶ If it is not taken prescriptively it is not true at all and becomes only a hope for the future (Hos 1:9-2:1 [1:9-10]; Jer 31:1, 33).⁶⁷ The tension between vision and reality is not to be resolved by abandoning the visible people. Throughout the First Testament the people of God is visibly organized yet based on faith, and has to be viewed in this-worldly terms yet also be viewed theologically.⁶⁸ The New Testament people of God, too, lives with this tension; it both asserts that Christ's community ignores all ethnic boundaries and also believes in the continuing significance of the actual people Israel (see esp. Rom 9 – 11).

9 So What Does it Mean to be the People of God?

It is an encouragement to find within scripture the people of God coping with different modes of being, with the ambiguities we ourselves experience. God has said "Yes" to each of these. The monarchy was part of God's will, even though it had its earthly origin in an act of human rebellion. The community has to find ways of living with the experience of God's promises not being fulfilled, and the First Testament as a whole includes responses such as the development of a focus on the End and of the Chronicler's "realized eschatology"; while worship can have a low place on God's list of priorities for Israel, when it is in danger of disillusion and loss of identity, Chronicles' emphasis on God's presence in its worship helps to sustain it and keep it alive. How it understands itself and lives out its calling has to vary with circumstances; the mode appropriate before may be inappropriate now. The Rechabites' anachronistic way of life was their calling even in the time of Jeremiah, but it was not that of the majority.

The danger is that our choice of a perspective from the varied ones the First Testament offers may be arbitrary. A predetermined understanding of what it means to be God's people may be bolstered exegetically by appeal to biblical warrants that support a stance chosen before coming to the Bible. Even the appeal

⁶⁶ Cf. J. H. Marks, "God's Holy People," *ThT* 29 (1972-73): 22-33 (p. 26).

⁶⁷ Cf. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes*, p. 38.

⁶⁸ Cf. Hertzberg, *Werdende Kirche im Alten Testament*, pp. 10, 25.

to context may provide only a rationalization for using the First Testament to justify a predetermined stance without examining the possibility that the First Testament points in other directions. In other words, it may function ideologically.

It needs to take account, for instance, of the fact that some of these modes of being are of more lasting significance than others. Contrary to common popular assumption, Israel was not always a nation; still less was Israel always an institutional state. On the other hand, Israel always remained a collection of families, a people, and Israel was from the beginning a *qahal* that gathered together for worship, judgment, and war (e.g., Exod 32:1, the verb; Judg 20:1-2; 1 Sam 17:47). Israel's history cannot be portrayed as a simple development from family to state to religious community, nor in the reverse direction from a community with a distinctive ideology via a state to a society that now emphasized kinship bonds. Israel was always a community of faith, though always also an ethnic one.

Further, while various contexts enable certain aspects of what it means to be the people of God to find expression, they also impose limits on what can find expression there. Living with the tension between vision and reality is both the strength of the postexilic community and also its limitation. Historical practicalities determine what aspects of "being the people of God" emerge in this context.

Indeed, this is true of any context. Israel finds itself at different points a family, a nation, an institutional state, a defeated remnant. Each of these experiences has corollaries for what it means to live as the people of God: being unsettled, involving oneself in politics and war-making, taking on the structures of statehood, beginning to be scattered over the known world. It cannot be simply assumed that any of these are intrinsic to being the people of God; they may simply be the chance results of historical particularities, part of the context in which Israel had to discover what it means to be the people of God, and not part of the meaning itself. We need to look not only at the historical accidents of the form of the people of God, the ways in which they could not help following the drift of history, but at the way they modified the trajectory.

By implication, then, the people of God cannot take for granted that each of these models of what it means to be the people of God is equally available for appropriation. Although God says "Yes" to each of them, at each point God's activity with and through the people necessarily means God is involved with them where they are; this does not imply thereby designating that place as an ideal one. Although God then takes them some way along a road, this does not mean they have thereby arrived. God's purpose and vision for them has to interact with the intransigent realities of the situation and the flaws in the raw material God has to deal with. God's "Yes" to war, kingship, urbanization, worship, a focus on the End, and early catholicism may thus be a qualified "Yes." God's grace in the story of the people manifests itself not least in staying with them out of a willingness to adapt to historical and human realities, yet without abandoning the ultimate will and vision.

So "when is Israel really Israel?"⁶⁹ Hardly at the very beginning of the story, in the period of the ancestors, despite the far-reaching significance of both the emphasis on kinship and that on promise. The First Testament itself recognizes this period as prehistory, as the time of the ancestors; Israel in the strict sense is not yet even present.

⁶⁹ Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, p. 172.

John Macquarrie suggests that the trajectory reaches its high point at the end. On his view, the postexilic community's self-understanding is the noblest and clearest, recognizing as it does that peoplehood is based on faith and is not bound to any natural community, nation, or political institution.⁷⁰ But this perspective oversimplifies the postexilic community's self-understanding, under the influence of a churchly perspective that prefers to regard nationhood and land as accidental rather than intrinsic to the being of the people of God. Whether or not this view does justice to the New Testament, it makes an inadequate starting point for the dynamic of the First Testament's own perspective on "when is Israel really Israel?"

Nor is Israel really Israel at the center of the story, in the period of the monarchy, for the story makes quite explicit that the trappings of state are at best ambivalent in significance, that the dynamic of God's dealings with Israel during this period resides in the prophets, not in the official institutions of state, and that the exile constitutes an eventual negative judgment on the period of being a state like other states.

The modern state of Israel has found its model and support for its self-understanding and stance in political affairs in the exodus from bondage among the nations and the confident aggressiveness of the conquest of the promised land.⁷¹ For liberation theology, too, the exodus was the paradigm experience of Israel that the church sought to experience for itself.⁷² It will hardly do, however, to reassert the triumphalism of the theocracy as if it had not collapsed into the disorder of the judges period and, via the monarchy, into exile. If we will not learn from history, we are condemned to repeating it. A central question for modern Judaism has to be the relationship of the humiliation of the holocaust and the triumphs of the state.

Precisely because being cut down to size by exile was God's act of judgment, Israel is admittedly not really Israel when it is the afflicted remnant. Increase, not decimation, was Israel's destiny. Yet in certain respects God's people "found themselves" in exile, and the vision of the afflicted servant has often provided Israel with the model that has most meaningfully enabled it to interpret its position in the world, even if after Auschwitz the Jewish people have shown signs of declaring that enough is enough.

Similarly, Latin American Christians cannot be expected to accept that humiliation and oppression are their lot for ever. Yet they, too, need a theology of exile. In light of the experience and the achievement of Jesus, the vision of the afflicted servant has often seemed to Christians the point of deepest insight and moment in the First Testament. Whether or not the question of the relationship between humiliation and triumph is raised for the church by its present experience, it is raised by the church's origins: both the experience of Jesus and that of his apostle to the gentiles (see esp. 2 Cor 4) open up the question of the relationship between suffering and death on one hand, resurrection and gift of the Spirit on the other. Either a Jew or a Christian might be in danger of imposing this question on the First Testament if it were not there; but it is there, in the issue raised by the relationship of Israel's two paradigm experiences, exodus and exile.

⁷⁰ *The Faith of the People of God*, p. 25.

⁷¹ Cf. L. Grollenberg, *Palestine Comes First* (London: SCM, 1980), pp. 130-31.

⁷² The exodus is "the original principle on which the whole biblical concept of God and faith is based" (H. Assmann, *Practical Theology of Liberation* [London: Search, 1975] = *Theology for a Nomad Church* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976], p. 35).

So the trajectory traced by the motif of the people of God reaches its first high point with the theocratic nation, but (to allegorize) blows a fuse at this point that ultimately requires a massive mid-course correction with the afflicted servant.

While it will not do to ricochet back from the exile to the exodus as if intervening history had not taken place, neither can we regard exile as the people of God's ultimate destiny. The midcourse correction does not go back on the fundamental insight of the theocratic nation; this is reasserted in the exile. It does, however, suggest a radical reformulation of what is involved in being the theocratic nation. We discover what it really means to be Israel when the vision of the theocratic nation and the vision of the afflicted servant come together in the exile.

The two do so, in particular, in Isa 40 - 55, though not in such a way as to make the relationship between them completely clear. Indeed, as these chapters unfold, both visions come into increasingly sharp focus, but the relationship between them becomes less and less clear. Yahweh's arm is made bare before the nations in the triumphant restoration of the suffering exiles and in the suffering and triumphant restoration of Yahweh's servant (Isa 52:10; 53:1); but these two very different manifestations of Yahweh's might are juxtaposed without being brought into relationship. It is when the two come together, however, that Israel is really Israel. It is from this vantage point that the First Testament material on the people of God can most satisfactorily be perceived as a whole. What precedes, leads here; what follows, leads from here without exactly taking us further, until (if we see the continuation of the story of Israel in the New Testament) Jesus brings glory and humiliation together in his own person and passes on this vision to his followers.

The people of God, then, are called to follow God's lead wherever it takes them, expectant of being led into their inheritance, yet also obliged to accept that their calling takes them via affliction and death. The church is the community led by the Holy Spirit in the way of the crucified one. Neither aspect of this calling comes naturally, and neither has the church found easy to accept; *a fortiori*, to hold them together is more difficult. Often the church, like Israel, has only been able to fulfill some less demanding calling, but God's way of relating to Israel shows that, even so, God will not abandon them. If the church's situation most resembles that of the postexilic community and the church can only subsist as (for instance) a worshiping community, the acceptance of the worshiping community in First Testament times and the presence of Chronicles in the canon indicate that God will not cast it off. It may not fulfill God's highest will, and triumph, but it may at least survive. Nevertheless, theocracy tempered by the call of the servant remains the calling.